

The Role of Women in Ministry  
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Introduction:

The thoughts I offer today are by no means complete or fully worked out. Nor do they reflect exhaustive research and study. However, it is my deep hope that this may begin a conversation and point churches towards intellectual virtue and careful review of texts which have long been considered settled issues in terms of their interpretations. The role of women in Christian ministry has often been cause for debate. Today I hope to move beyond hollow rhetoric and briefly lay out a refreshed view of women in ministry that I believe to be at the heart of the New Testament and of course Paul. In the first part, I'll be speaking to 3 examples of women in ministry that we find within the Bible, and then move to reviewing the use of 1 Timothy 2 as a mandate against the ordination of women.

Mary, Junia, Phoebe:

An important first step in addressing the issue of women in ministry seems to be deciding what ministry means. While I could go on all day, suffice it to say that it seems clear from the text that ministry was centrally the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel is the news that Jesus is the crucified and risen Messiah of Israel. This is the message that Peter voices in every sermon in Acts, and this is the heart of every word that Paul writes--most explicitly in 1 Corinthians 15. So given this definition of ministry seen clearly in Acts as gospel proclamation, the importance of John chapter 20 for understanding who has a role in ministry can't be understated.

On the basis of John chapter 20 we can conclude that the very first person to engage in gospel proclamation and therefore ministry is **Mary Magdalene**. Jesus does not act at random, and so we must also conclude that he intentionally reveals himself to Mary before anyone else. He shows her that he is the risen lord, and she carries this news to his disciples. Among the many things that need to be said about the gospels is that we gain nothing by ignoring the fact that Jesus chose twelve males. But every time this point is made – and in my experience it is made quite frequently – we have to comment on how interesting it is that there comes a time in the story when the disciples all forsake Jesus and run away; and at that point, long before the rehabilitation of Peter and the others, it is the women who come first to the tomb, and are the first to be entrusted with the news that he has been raised from the dead. This is of incalculable significance. Mary Magdalene and the others are the apostles to the apostles.

We should not be surprised that Paul refers to the woman **Junia**, as an apostle in Romans 16:7. If an apostle is a witness to the resurrection, there were women who deserved that title before any of the men. Given that women could hold the high office of apostle, it's unsurprising that when we turn to Acts, and the persecution that arose

against the church, we find that women are being targeted equally alongside the men. Saul of Tarsus was going to Damascus to catch women and men alike and haul them off into prison. Historical scholars point out that this only makes sense if the women, too, are seen as leaders, influential figures within the community.

What we know from the history of the early church, particularly the work of Eusebius and also that which we glean from tradition, informs us that those who were entrusted to deliver Paul's letters would have been the first to read them aloud to the assembled church and also answer any follow up questions that arose. This means that Phoebe, a woman, is the first to expound on and essentially preach the letter to the Romans, considered by many to be the heart of the New Testament. Paul commends his trusted carrier in Romans 16.

#### I Timothy 2:

Women mustn't be teachers; they mustn't hold any authority over men; they must keep silent. That, at least, is how many translations put I Timothy 2. This is the main passage that people quote when they want to forbid the ordination of women. The whole passage seems to be saying that women are second-class citizens at every level. They are the daughters of Eve, the original troublemaker.

Well, that's how most people read the passage in our culture until quite recently. I fully acknowledge that the very different reading I'm going to suggest may sound at first like I'm trying to tailor this bit of Paul to fit our culture. But there is good, solid scholarship behind what I'm going to say, and I genuinely believe it may be the right interpretation.

You don't have to embrace every aspect of the women's liberation movement to find the standard presentation of I Timothy 2 hard to swallow. Not only does it stick in our throat as a way of treating half the human race; it doesn't fit with what we see in the rest of the New Testament, in the passages we've already glanced at with Mary, Junia, and Phoebe.

Given that the task of understanding scripture needs to be Kingdom-oriented, historically-rooted exegesis, placing this letter back into its historical cultural context can reveal nuances and emphasis that we fail to see reading the letter as Americans with American English categories. There are some signs in the letter that it was originally sent to Timothy while he was in Ephesus. Historically, most of what we know about Ephesus is that the main religion – the biggest Temple, the most famous shrine – was a female-only cult. The Temple of Artemis was a massive structure which dominated the area; and befitting a female deity, the priests were all women. They ruled the show and kept the men in their place.

The key to the present passage is to recognise that it is commanding that women, too, should be allowed to study and learn, and should not be restrained from doing so (verse 11). They are to be 'in full submission'; this is often taken to mean 'to the men', or

'to their husbands', but it is equally likely that it refers to their attitude, as learners, of submission to God or to the gospel – which of course would be true for men as well. But in Ephesus, it was already taken for granted that women could hold leadership roles. Paul was making clear that men and women were equally capable of being learners and teachers, being especially careful to challenge the assumptions of the cult of Artemis--like exclusively female clergy.

Conclusion:

Given this historically rooted reading of I Timothy 2 and the ministry positions held by the three women I mentioned previously, it makes good sense that the New Testament does not stand opposed to women as leaders in ministry. While Men and Women do compliment one another, and were created to do so, each is equally capable of leadership in ministry, whether that be deacon, pastor, elder, or bishop. It is vital to the health of the Church that all persons regardless of gender that are called to high offices of ministry be encouraged and aided in every way.

-Thank you-